

Some Problems Involved in Writing the History of the Confederacy

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When, unguardedly, I succumbed to the blandishments of the chairman of the program committee, Professor Binkley, and agreed to present this paper, it seemed that the task would be a fairly easy one.¹ But later, when I attempted to set down explicitly these "problems" as I see them, it became painfully evident that they are only my problems and that they may not present the same difficulties to others that they do to me. While, therefore, this presentation may prove to be only an embarrassing confession of my own ignorance, perhaps it may still serve its purpose by provoking a general discussion which will elicit new points of view and new sources of information. Of course, everyone here will understand that it is impossible within the limits of such a paper as this to list all the problems which must confront anyone who undertakes such a complex subject as the history of the Southern Confederacy.

This future historian will first have to answer for himself the question, "What kind of a history is this to be? What is to be its scope, where its emphasis?" If we answer the question for him, we shall probably say that what we do *not* want is a history that lays undue emphasis upon any particular phase of the story, whether it be military operations, or the political and administrative policies and difficulties of the Confederate government, or the socio-economic conditions of the people. We want instead a full, comprehensive, well-balanced and ar-

¹ This paper was read before the Southern Historical Association at its First Annual Meeting, in Birmingham, Alabama, October 25, 1935.

ticulated account that will give due weight to all discoverable factors in the struggle of the Southern people for independence and their failure to achieve it. Without sacrificing accuracy, it should have as much literary charm as the writer is capable of imparting to it. You may say that such an ideal is unattainable, and it probably is; but our historian must necessarily set up some such ideal even though he may not be able to approximate it. It becomes evident at once that he will need our sympathy.

We may assume that our historian has already done extensive research in the period of the Confederacy. If he is at all well qualified for his task, he will have discovered that there is hardly a problem of any consequence whose roots do not run back into ante-bellum conditions. He must therefore make himself as well acquainted as possible with the ante-bellum South. It need not be said to this audience that, although much excellent work has now been done in that field and more is under way, much more still needs to be done before we can visualize the whole picture of the South as it was just before secession. Thanks to the great work of the lamented U. B. Phillips and others we now have illuminating accounts of the organization and administration of the plantation and the working of the system of slavery. This will be helpful in dealing with one important aspect of the life of the Confederacy. But we know too little about the outlook and attitudes of the small farmers who constituted the great mass of the population. It would be a great boon to have such a study of the ante-bellum small farmer as Rupert B. Vance has made of his descendants; but the material for case-histories is lacking. Too little is known about the Southern business men, whether merchants, factors, industrialists or bankers—men who were to play important, if relatively inconspicuous parts in the struggle for Southern independence. Broadus Mitchell, in his *William Gregg*,² and Dr. Kathleen Bruce, in her excellent *Virginia Iron Manufacture in the Slave Era*,³ have shown what may be done on the little known subject of Southern industrial development. But our historian will need to

² Chapel Hill, 1928.

³ New York, 1931.

know something of the status of the iron business in northern Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee, for it was from the little mines and smelters in these states that the Confederate ordnance bureau was procuring the greater part of its iron by 1863. And it would be helpful for him to get as much information as possible about the little wool and cotton yarn mills and cloth mills which were scattered from Virginia to Mississippi, inadequate though they were for the needs of both the army and the civilian population. Especially useful would be some knowledge of Southern banks and banking, their functional relation to both Southern and Northern credit policies, and of the banking laws of the several Southern states and how they actually operated. He may then be able better to understand the wartime financial and fiscal policies of the Confederate government and of the states. In brief, he must acquaint himself with the nature and extent of the material resources of the South before he can proceed to the more difficult task of discovering and revealing how they were organized, administered, and utilized under the Confederacy. And at present he would find himself sorely in need of searching studies of ante-bellum state politics—studies which give careful attention both to personal and factional rivalries and to economic and social backgrounds. For some states virtually nothing of lasting importance has been done while for others such studies as have appeared have tended to present the reaction to Federal politics rather than to local issues. This is not to intimate that interest in Federal issues was unimportant, for it *was* important; but one suspects that local or intrastate issues played a much larger part in state affairs even in the eighteen-fifties than they do in most of our state histories. And we may be quite sure that local ante-bellum political alignments and jealousies were carried over into the public affairs of the Confederacy. All these things are mentioned merely as illustrations of the general contention that our unfortunate historian will need to know much more than any one of us, I suspect, now knows about the ante-bellum South.

Coming now directly to the Confederacy itself, let us consider for a moment the problem of handling the military operations. Notwithstanding the tendency of historians in recent years to relegate military

matters to a much less conspicuous place in favor of economic, social, and other factors—a shift of emphasis with which, I confess, I strongly sympathize—how can any comprehensive history of the Confederacy neglect the military portions of the story? Popular attention was fixed upon the armies as upon no other one thing. Upon them depended the fate of the “revolution.” To use a very trite illustration, we cannot eliminate the melancholy Dane and still call our play “Hamlet.” But when our historian undertakes the story of the military campaigns he must face two difficult problems. One is that of space and proportion. It is extremely difficult to describe such a complicated thing as a military campaign briefly and also satisfactorily, for almost innumerable factors arose to condition every plan and movement. If the historian says nothing of them he leaves the impression that the armies moved in straight lines over a smooth surface, and he really tells us nothing. If, on the other hand, he tries to tell everything that had a significant bearing on the results of the operations, his narrative runs on and on into more volumes than he can bear to think of. The other difficulty is likely to be even greater. It is that of so analyzing the military operations that he can retain the respect of competent military technicians. It may seem surprising that out of all the extensive literature of the Civil War very little has been written in a manner to satisfy the critical expert who is thoroughly trained in the techniques of both military science and historical investigation. Very few of the narratives of participants can be relied upon; for some had forgotten much before they began to write; others wrote primarily to defend their own reputations; others, still, merely to meet public demand or to gratify a very human desire to leave a record of their own achievements. When they consulted documents they used official reports, a notoriously faulty type of evidence. Later historians have too often relied upon these same narratives or official reports. Most of them lacked the technical training for analyzing a military situation or the logistics and tactics employed and have given no consideration, or very little, to conditions of terrain, weather, roads, means of transportation, availability of supplies, and the scores of other things that contributed to success or failure. There are some men,

trained in the staff schools or the War College of the United States army, competent in both the military and the historical techniques, like Colonel A. L. Conger and Colonel O. L. Spaulding, Jr., who have made permanent contributions to the study of these military operations; and there are others in civil life like Thomas R. Hay and Douglas S. Freeman whose fine work is fresh in our minds. There are some whose technical knowledge of military matters cannot be questioned but who have failed utterly to take into account the imponderables that weigh so heavily in warfare and, which is even worse, have shown a deplorable lack of critical ability in the handling of evidence. The work of the distinguished British officer, Major General J. F. C. Fuller, may be cited as an example.

What is our historian to do if he lacks the requisite training in military science? It is easier to ask the question than to answer it. Perhaps his only safety lies in first getting the critical advice of experts and then in resort to caution and prayer.

There is another subject closely related to military operations which has received little attention from the military historians; and this is surprising because every trained military man is well aware of its importance. I refer to the work of the services of supply or, to use the terminology of the 1860's, the subsistence, quartermaster's, medical, and ordnance bureaus of the war department. In the first place, these bureaus were absolutely essential to the very existence of the armies and any serious lapse in their functioning might quickly disrupt the plans of the military commander and involve the loss of a campaign. When the bureau of subsistence failed to provide food for the men, or the quartermasters to furnish shoes or sufficient transportation, or the ordnance bureau to bring up ammunition, even military genius could not overcome such a handicap. And such things happened. In the second place, these services of supply reached into almost every community of the South and out through the blockade to Europe. The inside story of their administration, if it could be fully told, would not only throw new light upon the difficulties and some of the failures of the commanders in the field but would also reveal much about the resources of the Southern

people and the troubles encountered in making them available. In fact, they touch upon almost every activity of the Confederate government and on much of that of the states. But the difficulties of reconstructing even an approximation of the full story of these services seem practically insuperable. That vast compilation, *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*,⁴ though an unrivaled storehouse of information, by no means contains adequate material on this subject. Compiled by war department clerks who had no training in and little conception of the importance of the economic side of war, it places the emphasis upon the work of the armies in the field. Such information as pertains to the Confederate services of supply seems to have been included rather incidentally. This is especially true of the bureau of subsistence which was presided over until near the end of the war by the eccentric L. B. Northrop. Many of the original records were lost during the conflict or were destroyed, accidentally or purposely, in the confusion of the last days. Some of them, overlooked by the compilers of the *Official Records*, are to be found in the "Confederate Archives," Old Records Division of the adjutant general's office in Washington; but they are difficult to search out. A little material has found its way into other public repositories, a little is in private hands. But unless other collections are uncovered, there will remain many puzzling gaps in the story.

Everybody knows that one of the heaviest handicaps of the Confederates was their lack of sufficient mechanical industries to supply their own needs. Reference has already been made to the desirability of learning more about the extent and conditions of these industries before the war began. It is, of course, even more necessary for the historian to find out all he can about their condition and contributions to the common cause during the war. Of some we can find incomplete accounts, amounting in certain cases to mere fragments; of others merely the location; while others still have left little more than a trace. Some, we know, wore out their machinery and closed down; some were destroyed, with all their records, either by accidental fires or by invading armies.

⁴ Washington, 1880-1901, 70 vols. in 128.

We can only hope that sometime enough records may turn up to enable the historian to reconstruct their story in greater part than now seems possible. We know that there was a deplorable scarcity of every kind of fabricated article—cloth, tanned leather, iron or steel tools, horse-shoes, plows, nails, needles, bagging and rope for cotton bales, sacks for shipping grain, glassware, everything that was in common use. One of the prime necessities, salt, now so common that we take its abundance as a matter of course, was so scarce that procuring even a meager supply became one of the major problems of both the people and the state governments. Fortunately we now have the excellent study of Dr. Ella Lonn on *Salt as a Factor in the Confederacy*.⁵ But we lack any sort of account of such local industries as tanneries, wagon shops, shoe shops and the like. The same is true of the small private gun factories; but thanks to the enthusiastic researches of a few collectors of old firearms the locations of many of these small factories have been determined. Too often, however, the quantity and quality of their output have remained mysteries. It may seem to some of you that I am asking too much of the historian of the Confederacy in setting this problem before him. I am convinced, however, that the scarcity of fabricated articles so much needed in everyday life, had an important bearing on the outcome of the war, for it affected not merely the efficiency of the armed forces but had much to do with the war-weariness and the irritation that were so much in evidence in the last two years of the conflict. Our historian should neglect nothing that materially affected the conditions and the temper of the people who must support the armies.

The development of the railroads in the ante-bellum South has received some attention, beginning with U. B. Phillips' *History of Transportation in the Eastern Cotton Belt* in 1908;⁶ but except for one brief article published nineteen years ago and the interesting but rather superficial chapter in F. B. C. Bradlee's *Blockade Running during the Civil War*,⁷ there has been very little published on the part played by the

⁵ New York, 1933.

⁶ New York, 1908.

⁷ Salem, Mass., 1925.

railroads in the struggles of the Confederacy. Mr. Robert S. Henry's *Story of the Confederacy*⁸ is practically the only narrative of the military campaigns that gives attention to the problem of Confederate railroad transportation. There is considerable material available, but it is scattered through almost every conceivable collection of sources. The material on inland waterways transportation—by river and canal—is more restricted and more difficult of access. Of wagon roads and wagons our historian will probably be able to say only that the roads were usually very bad and that wagons, and teams to pull them, became so scarce that local transportation in many sections broke down completely.

Of paramount importance in any general account of the Confederacy are the financial and fiscal operations and devices of the general and the state governments. All of us are familiar with the work of J. C. Schwab, *The Confederate States of America*,⁹ and of E. A. Smith, *The History of the Confederate Treasury*,¹⁰ both of which appeared in 1901. These men actually examined the records of the Confederate department of the treasury and their publications are very helpful in following out the formal operations of that department; but they wrote at a time when economists were very conservative and they were both much concerned with pointing out the dangers of paper money inflation. They did not, I think, give sufficient attention either to the background of Southern conditions—I mean the credit system, the tax systems, banking practices and banking laws before secession—or to the inherent difficulties which confronted the treasury officials during the war itself. Anyone who looks into all the pertinent facts without prejudice will have some difficulty, I apprehend, in determining just how the Confederacy could have solved its financial problem. Some errors of the Confederate government, very serious ones, are obvious. Certainly the refunding act of February 17, 1864, proved worse than a failure; but was there really any way by which at that late day the Congress could have redeemed the credit of the government? In this connection, it

⁸ Indianapolis, 1931.

⁹ New York, 1901.

¹⁰ Harrisburg, 1901.

would be well for the historian to look into the banking experience and the financial views of Christopher G. Memminger before the war as he expressed them in his controversy with the Bank of the State of South Carolina. If he thinks that Mr. Memminger was entirely ignorant of the principles of public finance he may find things that will surprise him. The development of the Confederate tax system as well as the tax systems and financial operations of the several states and their repercussions upon Confederate finances will require careful consideration.

Among the many measures of the Confederate government which must receive attention are the following: the provisions and administration of the conscription acts; the methods adopted to check desertion from the armies (and the causes of desertion); the suspensions of the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus; the sequestration of the property of "alien enemies"; the policy and methods of impressment of supplies and labor; the belated efforts to control blockade running in the interest of the general government; and the effects of all these measures upon the public temper, or, more accurately, upon the interests and attitudes of certain economic and political groups of the population. Fortunately, there are excellent monographs on some of these subjects: Dean A. B. Moore's *Conscription and Conflict*;¹¹ Dr. Ella Lonn's *Desertion during the Civil War*;¹² and Mr. S. B. Thompson's *Confederate Purchasing Operations Abroad*.¹³ Although the historian may be able to bring to light some new material on the subjects of these special studies, he is not very likely to find any that will warrant a substantial modification of the conclusions set forth in them. Evidence is available on all the others, although scattered sometimes in rather obscure places. The task of our historian will be not so much to find the sources of information as to weigh the relative effects of all such measures upon the work of the armies, the condition and attitudes of the people and the fortunes of the Confederacy. In doing this he will find difficulty enough to challenge all his powers of analysis.

¹¹ New York, 1924.

¹² New York, 1928.

¹³ Chapel Hill, 1935.

There were two other difficult problems of the Confederate government—and, in large measure, of the states also—which are likely to prove nearly as troublesome to the historian. One was how to make best use of the slave population; the other was what to do with the great staple crops, especially cotton and tobacco. As to the slaves, we know that it was expected at first that they would be kept at their usual tasks on the plantations or at other work, except when hired as laborers on fortifications or in some other capacity with the armies. Even free Negroes were not to be accepted as soldiers. But slaves on the plantations must be kept under the accustomed discipline if they were to produce the needed food supplies. There was little difficulty on this score until the Federal armies made lodgment on the coasts and began to penetrate the planting regions of the Mississippi Valley. Then the Negroes became restless and the plantation routine near the Federal lines began to break up. This situation was the chief cause for the passage of the famous "twenty negro" exemption law of October 11, 1862, which had such troublesome repercussions among the nonslave-owners that, after some modifications, it was replaced, in February, 1864, by the provisions for "bond-exempts." But this was no less unpopular among the poorer people. To what extent did the poorer men who raised the cry, "It's a rich man's war and a poor man's fight," merely seize upon this particular exemption as a method of justifying, or of rationalizing, their very natural desire to escape the dangers and hardships of military service? Was the law unjust and inexpedient, considering the fact that food supplies must come chiefly from the plantations which could produce a surplus instead of from the small farms which could furnish but little? How else could the government, in the light of what we know of plantation management, have solved the problem? One other aspect of this slave problem should be mentioned. As the war dragged on and replacements in the army became more and more scanty, the government endeavored to make wider use of Negro slave labor on fortifications. Failing to procure enough by hiring, it resorted to impressment; and several of the states also passed laws for the impressment of slaves. Most planters protested the taking of their

Negro hands, alleging that the slaves were often overworked, underfed and were generally badly treated by the army officers, and that the withdrawal of their laborers from the plantation at critical times in planting, cultivating and harvesting crops was ruinous to the production of food supplies and therefore to the cause itself. How much of truth and how much of rationalization was there in all this? Or was the trouble merely in the administration of the law?

The cotton and tobacco question presents many angles. Could the Confederate government have utilized all the supply of cotton as a basis of credit in Europe at the beginning of the war and thus have solved its financial and naval problems? I mention this question not because I think it debatable—for I am unable to see that the scheme was feasible—but because it has been raised by others from time to time and it offers a neat opportunity for a discussion of all the factors involved in the situation. Let us turn to another side of the cotton question. Very early in the war the government undertook to prevent its exportation through the military lines to the North. For a time such cotton as was in danger of capture was burned either by those owners who were sufficiently patriotic or by state or Confederate officers. When the patriotism of the owners weakened because of their increasing privations and eager Northern buyers appeared just beyond the enemy's lines, a furtive but brisk trade through the lines began. The United States government encouraged this trade while the Confederate authorities frowned upon it and endeavored to stop it; but it went on throughout the rest of the war wherever the Union armies reached the cotton country. It made enormous profits to traders while to many Southern families it was the only means of procuring the necessities of life. The situation was one to foster official corruption; but although the air was full of accusations and innuendoes the beneficiaries were generally powerful enough to cover their tracks and but little direct evidence implicating individuals has come to light. Perhaps it should be said at this point that most of the evidence of official corruption points to officers in the Federal rather than those in the Confederate army; but that may have been because of the difference in opportunities. It would be interesting to know even

approximately what amount of supplies for the Confederate armies came through the lines from New Orleans in return for cotton and sugar while Benjamin F. Butler and Nathaniel P. Banks were in command in the Crescent City. Such exchanges went on in other quarters also but the evidence is generally so fragmentary that it excites without satisfying one's curiosity. One would like to know also what effect this clandestine trade between individual Southern families and Northern agents had upon the loyalty of those Southerners to the Confederate cause.

The limitations imposed by individual states upon the planting of cotton and tobacco, and the prohibitions upon the distillation of liquors, were interesting experiments in a region where the private property rights of the individual had always been held sacred. The laws were based upon the public necessity for the greater production and conservation of food supplies. It is easy to find what these laws provided; but it is very difficult to determine how well they were obeyed and administered and how effective they were.

The subject of the clandestine cotton trade suggests another. What do we know of the condition of Southern families left within the Federal lines in the subjugated districts, especially along the Mississippi? How did they adjust themselves to this situation? What of the treatment of the Negro population in such districts by Federal officials and by the favored contractors who were given the privilege of working abandoned plantations? Or should the historian of the Confederacy confine his attention to the ever-narrowing territory within the Confederate lines?

If he attempts to describe business conditions in the South during the war, what can he say except that most of it was deflected from its usual channels, that along some lines it practically dried up while in others it was stimulated to an extraordinary degree? We know in general the effects of the blockade, the downward plunges of the currency, the breakdown of transportation facilities, the frequent impressments, occasional state embargoes, the irruptions of Federal armies and the devastations of large areas in northern Virginia and in the Valley of the Mississippi. But very few records of business firms during this troubled

period are available and most of these are fragmentary. No business statistics seem to have been gathered in sufficient quantity to be of much value. In short, we are forced to resort to general deductions or impressions; for while we feel reasonably certain about some of these things, we lack the detailed evidence with which to support our generalizations. We find that some firms, fortunately situated, made enormous paper profits. We find much complaint of "speculators" who forestalled the markets, monopolized the necessities of life and callously oppressed the poor; but it is not always easy for us to distinguish between what was indubitably profiteering and what was the inevitable result of the rapid fall of the currency or of the actual physical scarcity of goods. Blockade-running made huge profits and the stocks of the corporations engaged in the business were bought and sold with all the frenzy that ever characterized the New York Stock Exchange; but extremely little information about the financial operations of these companies seems to have been preserved.

We know, likewise, that the families of the poor often endured the most severe privations, whether they were soldiers' wives and children living on small farms out in the remote hills or town dwellers trying to eke out an existence on fixed incomes whose purchasing power had vanished. We have some records of the townsmen's difficulties, but the rural folk were not the sort to leave much in the way of records. They must have written to their menfolk in the armies, but soldiers in the field could not preserve letters for the future historian.

This paper is becoming too long, but something should be said about the matter of politics. Despite the assertion of some Confederate leaders that politics was adjourned during the struggle for independence, one does not have to go far into the records to discover that this was not the case. As a matter of fact—and it would have been strange if it had been otherwise—when the first Congress met in Montgomery in February, 1861, it was divided into mutually distrustful groups. After the policies of the Davis administration had begun to take form, there was a marked shifting of old party lines, with former Whigs and Democrats supporting the administration and other Whigs and Democrats oppos-

ing it. There are, here and there, very definite traces of old divisions and old animosities, but the tendencies were for new alignments. In many instances these new groupings are very hard to trace, so many are the crosslines of obscure individual or local interests and so scanty is the documentary evidence. While we can follow the votes as recorded in the *Journals of the Confederate Congress*,¹⁴ the failure of the Congress to record and publish its debates reduces us largely to conjecture. The Southern Historical Society has done what it could to fill the gaps by publishing such of the proceedings, including summaries of speeches, as appeared in the Richmond newspapers; but its record begins only with the first session of the "Permanent" Congress on February 18, 1862, and cannot, naturally, cover the numerous secret sessions. It seems strange that so little has been discovered of the correspondence of the members of the Confederate Congress. If a few collections of such correspondence or a few good diaries of members of the House and Senate could be unearthed, we might be able to get at the explanation of a number of puzzling things. How, in the face of the military disasters in the West and on the coast, in the face of the growing unpopularity of members of his cabinet, such as Judah P. Benjamin, Memminger and Stephen R. Mallory, did Jefferson Davis manage for so long to maintain his hold over a majority of Congress? What of the activities of the congressional cliques that centered around P. G. T. Beauregard and Joseph E. Johnston? What are the real explanations of the widespread reaction against the administration as revealed in the congressional elections of 1863? Or was it really directed against the President? There is considerable evidence of the activities of the Georgia group of malcontents, but less is known of those in other states. Every state had its antiadministration group, large or small, but in most cases the records of their plans and activities are tantalizingly scanty. How much of this local opposition was based upon a doctrinaire devotion to the traditional rights of states—so strongly emphasized by Professor Owsley in his well-known book, *State Rights in the Confederacy*¹⁵—how much grew out of per-

¹⁴ Washington, 1904-1905, 7 vols.

¹⁵ Chicago, 1925.

sonal pique or jealousy, how much came of the politician's tendency to capitalize popular discontent, how much was due to honest difference of opinion? It is a nice problem.

It is obvious to anyone who has made any study of the Confederacy that these are by no means all the special problems that will confront the historian who would tell the full story. For instance, nothing has been said of the problem of the churches; nothing of the army hospitals, nor of the search for indigenous substitutes for medicines, nor of relief organizations. I have barely hinted at some of the many social activities of the states. I have not even suggested that there were troublesome constitutional problems; nor have I mentioned the difficulty of finding the records tracing the activities of the Confederate district courts.¹⁶ I have said nothing whatever about the foreign policy or foreign relations. This last subject, however, has received much more exhaustive and more adequate treatment than has the internal history.¹⁷

This rambling paper must end. By way of summary, it may be said that anyone who, in the present state of our knowledge and available sources, attempts now to write a comprehensive history of the very complex life of the Confederacy must do a great deal of pioneer work for himself. We greatly need more good monographic studies based upon an exhaustive examination of sources. The very complexity of the field as a whole presents a difficult problem in the organization of the material. The evidence on many points is very scanty and in some cases is likely to remain so; in other instances, though fairly abundant, it is often technical or conflicting. After all, however, these problems are always present to worry the historical investigator when he attempts to cover any large field of human endeavor.

¹⁶ Since this paper was written Major William Robinson has announced his discovery of the records of these courts. He has in preparation a work on the Confederate judiciary.

¹⁷ The latest and fullest discussion is in Frank L. Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy* (Chicago, 1931).